

Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

[fisheries](#) - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

Witness Statement

**Testimony
of
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before the
House Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans
Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
regarding the
"African Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2001" (H.R.643)
The "Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2001" (H.R.645) and the "Asian
Elephant Conservation Act of 2001" (H.R.700)**

March 15, 2001

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment on the *African Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act*, the *Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Reauthorization Act*, and the *Asian Elephant Conservation Act*. I am here today to represent the views of the Wildlife Conservation Society, founded in 1895 as the New York Zoological Society, a 105-year old US-based membership organization. The Wildlife Conservation Society conserves wildlife and wild lands throughout the world, as well as managing animal collections at the Bronx Zoo and other "living institutions" in the New York area. Given a long history of field conservation and the largest professional field staff of any international conservation organization - with nearly 300 field projects throughout the Americas, Asia, and Africa - we have a keen interest in all three pieces of legislation.

The Wildlife Conservation Society would like to thank the Subcommittee, Chairman Gilchrest and Congressman Saxton for recognizing the need and urgency, expressed in all three bills, to provide additional support for wildlife protection in lands beyond our own borders. These bills reflect the importance that American citizens place on conserving the wild, wonderful, inspiring creatures of this earth. Animals like rhinoceros, elephants, and tigers are culturally important to us Americans and to people around the world, and their conservation is a global responsibility. Their loss would be a diminution of our biological richness, our natural heritage, and our own spirits.

Unfortunately, there is a need for active conservation of rhinoceros, elephants and tigers. All five species of rhinoceros are under siege. The Javan and Sumatran species of rhino are critically endangered and their numbers continue to dwindle, a situation not helped by the political instability in Southeast Asia. In Africa, numbers of the formerly numerous black rhino have declined from perhaps 65,000 in 1970 to about 2,500 today, and the species has been extirpated over large areas of Africa. This decline continues: We have recently learned that the famous and well-known population of black rhinos in the Ngorongoro Crater of Tanzania is now almost gone. The news is better for the white rhino and the Indian rhino, whose numbers have increased substantially during this century, but even for these species the total world populations are only in the low thousands, and their continued survival is not guaranteed.

Population numbers of elephants are much greater. Here the concern is with the decline in numbers. For the African elephant, the dramatic decline in numbers from about 1.2 million to 600,000 in the 1980s was halted by vigorous conservation action, including the ivory trade ban. Numbers over the last few decades have been more stable, but recently an increase in hunting for ivory trade and for bushmeat is affecting populations in many parts of Africa. For the Asian elephant the situation is far more severe. There are less than 50,000 wild Asian elephants remaining, fully half of which are found in India. In Vietnam, China, and much of Laos and Cambodia, populations have declined to the point of near extinction. In Southeast Asia, habitat loss and hunting continue to threaten fragmented populations.

Tiger numbers are at perilously low levels, with a global population certainly less than 10,000. India remains a stronghold for tigers, and strong U.S. Government support in the past has been critical in shoring up populations. Future support should not be linked to geopolitical issues if at all possible. Tigers have vanished from most of Indochina and are critically threatened in Southeast Asia. The situation however is not universally bleak. In the Russian Far East, with consistent U.S. Government support, tiger populations have stabilized at something under 500 individuals, and there are indications of further recovery. A recent workshop, sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, brought together government officials from both China and Russia in an effort to expand cross boundary protected areas and address poaching threats.

Nevertheless, despite the threats to these species, conservation action is changing, and can change the situation. We congratulate you on bringing these bills up for reauthorization. As you have clearly recognized, the existing grant programs for tigers, rhinoceroses, and Asian and African elephants have been enormously successful. Because these programs are non-bureaucratically and efficiently run through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and provide timely direct financial support and leverage to high priority field efforts, we therefore encourage the use of similar operational mechanisms for administration of future appropriations.

The impacts on these programs and the conservation of these species has been real and significant. The accomplishments are all the more impressive when one considers that many of the range states have had to grapple with catastrophic civil war and social unrest during the last ten years. The Wildlife Conservation Society is proud to have been a partner in many of the projects supported through these programs.

The leadership provided by the U.S. government has stimulated actions from the international community to conserve these species. For instance, the initiative to monitor the illegal killing of elephants, initially supported by the United States, has now received significant support from the European Union. National governments of the range states of these species are increasingly investing their own scarce resources in conservation efforts. And the support provided by the U.S. government has underscored the importance of these endeavors, and allowed organizations like the Wildlife Conservation Society to secure additional private and philanthropic support for the conservation of rhinoceros, elephants and tigers.

The Wildlife Conservation Society is strongly supportive of conservation strategies that focus on individual species, and this subcommittee has heard previous testimony from Richard Lattis and Dr. Amy Vedder at hearings last year on the *Keystone Species Conservation Act* and the *Great Ape Conservation Act*. We recognize that the conservation of individual species is a concern that the public can relate to more easily than they can to the conservation of biological communities or ecosystems. And we also know that species-based approaches are appropriate on scientific grounds, rational on administrative grounds, and effective on the ground.

The Wildlife Conservation Society, for instance, focuses considerable conservation effort on a set of species known as "Landscape Species". These are species, like rhinoceros, elephant and tiger, that use large, ecologically diverse areas and often have significant impacts on the structure and function of natural ecosystems. Their requirements in space and time make landscape species particularly susceptible to human alteration and use of their habitats, and these species are among the most rapidly vanishing elements of

biodiversity worldwide. Yet a conservation strategy that focuses on the conservation of this set of species is responsible, efficient, and cost-effective.

- Conservation of landscape species, because of their large area requirements, secure the conservation needs of many other species, species assemblages, and larger-scale ecological processes;
- The use of a small set of selected species to achieve a broader set of conservation goals is highly efficient;
- The important functional role of landscape species provides a way to link species to landscapes and vice versa in functional ways;
- Landscape species provide a cost-effective way to achieve a significant set of conservation goals in the face of the challenge of addressing multiply threatened species and communities, and the difficulty in adequately understanding highly complex ecosystems and landscapes in a timely fashion.

We would therefore urge the Subcommittee to move swiftly on these bills:

1. We strongly recommend that reauthorization of the *African Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act*, the *Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act*, and the *Asian Elephant Conservation Act*. Funding these bills has been a sound investment of tax dollars.
2. We, together with a number of other conservation NGOs, strongly recommend increased funding of these bills. Annual appropriations of at least \$1.5 million for each in FY 2002 must surely be considered a minimum.
3. We strongly recommend that these funds remain flexible in the range of conservation activities for which they can be used, including but not limited to, research, monitoring, planning, training, conservation education and on-the-ground implementation.

The very survival of species like rhinoceros, elephant and tiger rests in the hands of our generation. How much poorer would our world be without these animals, and what accountability will we be held to by our children, and by our children's children if they were to vanish? Given the enormity of this responsibility, and the urgency of the need for increased conservation, we therefore urge the Subcommittee and the Congress as a whole to act quickly and positively on the reauthorization of these acts.

I thank you again for the opportunity to comment and to work with you on these bills. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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